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THE SPIRITUAL OPPORTUNITY OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL.

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ONE of the encouraging signs of our time is the attention that is given to the systematic study of childhood. We no longer think that anything is good enough for a child, but are coming to realize that all children ought to have the best in the way of training. Where politics do not interfere the "new education" is making itself felt, with the result that schools are rapidly improving in quality. I recently made inquiries for a friend of the headmaster of a prominent New England school, concerning vacancies in his institution. He answered that if the child was not more than two years of age, he could make a place for the boy, but all other places were taken for eleven years. That headmaster is full of the inspiration of the "new education;" and the first article of his educational creed is that the child must be studied before he can be taught what to study. The idea that any mother can wisely "bring up" her child is now exploded; and mothers' clubs for child-study and the study of methods for child-training are found in nearly all large towns. In what is commonly called secular education there has been a notable movement forward, but there has not been a corresponding advance in spiritual education; and yet the need for it in one department is quite as pressing as in the other. How to present the eternal and fundamental truths of life in ways which will commend them to the understanding and loyalty of childhood is no small task, but it is an imperative one.

The need of improved methods of spiritual training is found in the fact that in the long run men are swayed by their convictions concerning the spiritual realities. What they honestly believe about God, about their own personality and responsibility,

about what comes after death, determines character and conduct. The fountains of our lives are all in the unseen. The spirit is the real man. What we appear is only the expression of what, though still more vital, does not appear. The carelessness of people at this point is great and full of peril. Those who are anxious about manners, deportment, the formalities and niceties of conduct, utterly neglect the deeper matters of character without which manners are only veneer.

Spiritual training seeks a rational and true answer to two questions: "What shall I believe?" and, "How shall I act?" Or, in other words: "What shall I think?" and, "What shall I do?"

An answer to the first inquiry is essential to human happiness, and an answer to the second is essential to human welfare. For a time we may live as the beasts live, but not many years pass before the longing to know whose hands are holding us, and to what all things are tending, becomes the supreme inquiry. If there is nothing noble to believe, then life at the best is only a hideous nightmare whose end will be, let us hope, a blissful unconsciousness. Real happiness is dependent on such beliefs as make us practically sure that we are in the hands of love, and are moving toward the victory of the true and good.

The other inquiry is: "What shall I do?" Quite as many people fail because they do not *know how* to do the best, as because they do not desire to do so. What is right? Who shall teach us? Because these questions are often left unanswered there are bleeding hearts and broken homes all along the pathway of life. Few young people know how to make their crucial decisions, and, what is worse, they find few who are competent to help them. One of the greatest blessings of the Roman Catholic confessional, where priests have the spirit of Christ, is the fact that there is one place to which those who need light can go and get the benefit of sympathy, wisdom, and experience. There is need of spiritual training both as to what we shall believe and what we shall do.

This training will come, if it comes at all, through the home, through the Sunday school, or by chance.

But here we meet the pitiful fact that in most homes careful instruction in the things of the spirit is not only neglected, but often systematically ignored. Manners are looked after, but beliefs and the simplest rules of morals are left to be absorbed by chance. I have already indicated that this is not universal, and that there is an encouraging movement in the opposite direction; but still the number of the homes in which fathers exercise the holy privilege of teaching their children the sacred lessons of their divine ancestry and immortal destiny is pitifully small. The reason is not far to find. How can any be expected to teach what they have never learned? Thus, instruction in the most important of all subjects is left to the chances of the church, or to possible absorption. The Sunday school is the only means which a large proportion of the world ever has of learning about their relation to the unseen, or of finding help in their attempts to give rational answers to the sometimes difficult questions of what is right and what is wrong. Herbert Spencer was correct when he declared that very few young people are taught anything about the awful but glorious privileges of parenthood and of the wise guidance of their children. The modern home is the most beautiful institution in this world of ours. Ray Palmer was not far afield when he called it "the unlost paradise." Such at least it may be. Such, alas! always, it is not. If our homes were what they might be, every one would be for its inmates their holiest sanctuary.

At this point the church finds its mission, and, by its Sunday school, endeavors to supplement the deficiencies of the average home in the spiritual enlightenment of children. But how inadequate it is! One hour a week for spiritual instruction; twenty-five hours a week in day schools for the teaching which they give!

But this is the opportunity of the Sunday school—to open to childhood the truths of the spiritual life. If the Sunday school fails, it is usually the fault of those who begin by neglecting their own children, and end by discouraging all efforts on the part of others to care for them. As I understand the mission of

the Sunday school, it is primarily to teach children the verities of religion and the Christian way to order conduct; and, secondarily, to seek to persuade them by their own choice to become Christians. We have only made a beginning in improving our methods of teaching. The best Sunday schools now pursue the inductive study of the Bible. That is good as far as it goes, but I raise the question whether the better teaching of the future will not add systematic courses in the study of such subjects as the following: Who and what is God? What is meant by the word "spirit," when applied to man? and when it is applied to God? What is sin? What is the basis of responsibility? What is contained in the idea of salvation? What is the Bible? and why is it regarded as the word of God? Does death end all? These are the great questions of theological inquiry and philosophical speculation, but they are precisely those which children are asking, and which they ought to have answered, since they are at the age when an answer will most affect character. But these are not the only subjects that childhood should be taught. It needs, also, instruction in the foundations of morality; in the awful wreck and ruin that untruthfulness works, and the sure rewards of honor and virtue. If more boys were made to realize that a lie is a break in the moral order of the universe, and that the slightest dishonesty is a violation of the harmony of the world, there would be fewer sad stories of those who, in later years, have been perjurers and embezzlers. It is more important that children should be made to appreciate the sanctity of one's word than to be able to demonstrate the solemn fact that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. But these are the very lessons which are neglected. I would like to see in the Sunday school three courses of instruction: one devotional, one ethical, one biblical. I would have the biblical course a simple study of what the Bible contains, so that as soon as possible our children should know the contents of their Bibles as they know other books. Then I would have the great doctrines taught in their relation to life—not as mere barren speculations, but as the sublime spiritual facts on which the happiness and welfare of men are dependent. And, lastly, the art of right living

should be studied, as becomes sane men who realize that they are called to be virtuous and holy.

But here we meet two difficulties: How can we do this with only one brief hour a week at our disposal, and the parents not coöperating? and, How may we secure teachers with the ability and willingness to do the kind of work that should be done? The church faces many perplexing problems, but none more difficult of solution than how to give to its children the religious training which ought to be given by parents at home, and which, if they realize their privileges, could be better given by them.

The spiritual opportunity of the Sunday school is, according to its limited ability, to teach the children the Bible, the eternal truths of the Christian revelation, so far as they are essential to happiness and welfare, the basis of moral action; and, finally, so to educate them in matters of conduct that they shall know how to decide as to what is right and what is wrong, and shall prefer the right to the wrong. There is another opportunity, not less sacred in itself, but still one which does not belong to the Sunday school alone, and that is the privilege of helping so to influence the scholar that he will not only desire to know about God, but also be led to dedicate himself to his service. Here is an incomparable privilege. How strange that any parent can be willing to pass it on to another! It is a mournful fact, however, that if anyone ever puts the direct question to that child, "Will you devote yourself to the service of your fellow-men in the spirit of Christ?" it will be either his minister or his Sunday-school teacher. It sometimes seems as if the one opportunity of many to have the personal appeal of a loving heart made to them to enlist in the service of Christ is found in the Sunday school, and there alone. To teach the Bible; to lead the study about God, man, and immortality; to help to the art of making wise and right decisions, and then, loaded with great desires and deep affection, to push close to receptive, youthful souls the inquiry, "Will you enlist with Christ in working for the kingdom of God?" is the superb opportunity of everyone who is set in behalf of the church to teach in the Sunday school.

As one looks out upon the world with its swift and passionate

life, with its absorption in things which are seen, with its fierce rivalries and mad competitions, and then asks about the individual human beings in those hurrying crowds, he is made sick at heart. Is history only like a river whose current sweeps on forever, but which from one moment to another is never the same? We cannot believe that. These men and women and children have some other destiny than by and by to go over the precipice which we call death, into a deep and black abyss. Who shall teach them of the true Father? Who shall declare to them their sublime possibilities? Who shall help them to understand themselves and their mission? The succeeding generations of fathers and mothers ought to do this; but, if they will not, then the church, as well as it may, must take up the neglected opportunity. And more and more it should approach this duty intelligently. The Bible, the eternal truths of the Christian revelation, the principles which should guide conduct, should not be left to haphazard instruction, but placed in wise, earnest, and reverent hands. I am persuaded that we are yet to see great changes in this department of service. Already the kindergarten has begun to take the place of the old infant class. Most schools are doing well now in teaching what the Bible contains, in helping children to become church-members; but very many schools are still far behind their possibilities in opening the fundamental truths of our holy religion, and in helping those who study to know how to make wise and accurate moral discriminations. There are exceptions, of course. I know teachers whose pupils are led into the deeper things of the spirit so gently, so lovingly, so intelligently, and in such a reasonable way that every year of their lives will show the touch of the gracious hands by which they were trained.

Thus I interpret the spiritual opportunity of the Sunday school. That opportunity cannot be separated from its duty to teach. The Sunday school is not a little church. Worship is not its chief function. Children should worship with their elders in the great congregation. A school is for study. Exhortations have their place, and are important, but in the Sunday school they are secondary. If the truths of the Christian

revelation are taught in a rational way, and with a reverent spirit, they will make their own impression. We need to have more faith in the convincing and converting power of truth.

If the truth as it is expressed in the gospels, in its simplicity and beauty, is once clearly set before our children, sooner or later most of them will accept it, because sooner or later they will find that it, and it alone, can satisfy their souls in the hours of their deepest need.



THE VIRGIN MARY

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